Early Natural History in the Northwest

By Dan McCowan

In bygone days throughout what is now the Province of Alberta there was unique opportunity for the study of Natural History. Buffalo and antelope, present in prodigious numbers, were freely preyed upon by bands of wolves and by grizzly bears. The pursuit and capture of the beaver and other fur bearers formed staple industry in all parts of the country. Skies and sloughs were thronged with water-fowl and streams were well stocked with fish. Yet, save for a hand-ful of men of scientific bent, few of the early travellers to this region were interested in the life history and habits of beasts o f the prairies and woods or of fowls of the air.

Alexander Henry, the fur trader, who came to Rocky Mountains House in 1810 was naturally more concerned with the pelts of animals than with the behaviour of the creatures themselves. However in intervals between tending store, caring for domestic poultry and weeding a vegetable garden, he took to the woods with a muzzle-loading musket in pursuit of game. On one hunting trip he penetrated westward through the mountains as far as Howse Pass. From his journal we learn that Buffalo were then accustomed to range in summer even to the extreme source of the Saskatchewan river.

On another outing, to the country west of present day Wetaskiwin, Henry was vexed at failing to get within gunshot range of a huge grizzly but, as it turned out, this proved rather fortunate. He wrote:

" The bear eluding me I returned to the boat and pushed off. Seeing a flock of outardes (geese) I attempted to shoot, but my piece would not give fire and I found she needed to be fresh charged and have the flint repaired. How happy it was for me that I did not engage the grizzly bear".

Turning to the log of another traveller who had intimate early knowledge of western Canada we find that Sir George Simpson was usually in too great a hurry to devote much time to the manners and habits of animals and birds other than those which might be used in stocking the larders of trading posts and forts. Noting the immense herds of buffalo then inhabiting the prairies and foothills of Alberta he said:

" The buffaloes are incredibly numerous. In the year 1829 I saw as many as ten thousand of their putrid carcases lying mired in a single ford of the Saskatchewan and contaminating the air for many miles around".

Commenting on this country as being one of great extremes of climate, and of plenty and scarcity of game Simpson wrote ~~as follows,~~

" At some seasons both whites and natives are living in wasteful abundance on fish, flesh and fowl of all kinds while at other# times they starve. In the year 1820 when wintering at Athabasca Lake our provisions fell short and on several occasions I went for three whole days and nights without a single morsel of food ; but then again I was one of a party of eleven men and one woman which devoured three ducks and twenty two geese at a sitting".

There was one native animal of whose activities all early explorers, traders, trappers and the like were obliged to take notice. The wolverine, a large and cunning weasel, a bad actor seldom caught in the act, raided food caches, robbed traps and was generally malicious. Paul Kane, a Toronto artist who lived at Fort Edmonton during the winter of 1847-48, tells of one of these animals gaining access to a store of food by squeezing itself through the ~~########~~ narrow space between the heavy logs forming the cache. Desperately lean when it had

made entry the animal speedily waxed fat on repeated meals of dried meat and thereby became a prisoner. When Kane and his guide arrived it had eaten all of their precious provisions and ~~###~~, being unable to regain freedom was promptly shot by the irate and hungry travellers.

Dr Cheadle, who with Viscount Milton passed through Edmonton in 1863 en route to the Cariboo gold field, makes mention in his most entertaining diary of a Wolverine which took up residence in the temporarily untenanted Jasper's House during the previous summer. There was nothing edible within that remote trading post at the time, but the brute ate all the parchment which commonly took the place of glass in the windows of primitive outpost buildings.

One of the most delightful books on early days, and particularly on hunting, in western Canada is that bearing the title "Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains". It was written and illustrated by the Earl of Southesk, a Scots nobleman who, in the intervals between hunting and posting his diary, devoted much time to the study of Shakspear's plays. In 1859 he ran buffalo on the Plains and there also strove hard to bag a grizzly. Around camp fires in what is now Jasper National Park his half-breed guides and packers told him awesome stories about the ferocity of cougars which, at the moment might well be lurking in the dark woods beyond the firelight. Southesk was in all likelihood, the first tourist to visit the Canadian Rockies and it is evident that even then the natives were fully primed to humbug the innocent traveller

On the headwaters of Brazeau river, west of modern Nordegg, the Earl from Forfarshire had good sport amongst the large bands of Big Horn sheep inhabiting that area. With the Rocky Mountain goats he was not so successful, as ~~is borne out~~ illustrated ~~###~~ by this extract from the record of

his hunting trip;

" I had set my heart on getting some of these white goats and this looked like my last chance. I lay there on the mountain side, almost fainting with toil and very sore at heart. These animals began to seem to me like the enchanted beasts in German stories which lure men to destruction and then mock at their misery. Once I had nearly broken my neck and twice nearly broken a blood vessel in following them -and all in vain. A sort of frenzy came over me and I vowed to pursue them to the death. After further exertion I finally shot one of them but it fell over a cliff and was thereby rendered useless as a trophy.

Sat up late reading "Much ado about Nothing". The wolves howled and the night was very cold ".